

Sunday, October 28, 2018 - Reformation Sunday (Observed)  
**“Why Celebrate the Reformation?”**

Romans 3:21-24

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Question Answered Structure

*Adapted from CPR*

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Does the Reformation still matter? Do we really need a special service to remember what the Reformation was all about? I guess it's helpful to remind us that Martin Luther is not the African-American civil rights leader from the 1960s! Last year leading up to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the major historical event called The Reformation I came across an Amazon listing of a coffee mug that said, “Reformation 500” or something like that with a picture of Dr. King next to it - some enterprising individual saw an opportunity to cash in and got the wrong century and wrong continent. No, the Dr. Martin Luther we remember today is the guy Dr. King is named after, who lived in Germany some 500 years ago and helped reform the church. It's certainly useful for knowing who we are as Lutherans, a bit of our history. But does the Reformation really matter beyond that classroom exercise of keeping our tradition alive?

At first glance, the answer is no. You see, the Reformation wasn't so much about Martin Luther as it was about righteousness and certainty. How could we be right with God? How can anyone be certain of eternal life? Those were the questions the Reformation wanted answered.

In the United States today, most people aren't too concerned about those questions. Polls show most Americans don't think much about heaven or hell. In fact, most don't believe there is a literal place called hell. Neither do many believe there is a personal demonic being called Satan. As for heaven, not many get excited about the topic. Perhaps we're not hungry, sick, or persecuted enough to look forward to a much better life. Life is pretty good in our country.

But some people do still believe in life after death, which necessitates at least thinking about what will happen once you die. But, when asked, just about everyone says they are going to heaven. Americans believe in happy endings. Americans are eternally optimistic. So if everything will ultimately turn out all right anyway, why worry about whether you're right with God or wonder how you can be certain about eternal life?

As an example of this happy optimism, after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, someone drew a picture of the buildings, with the smoke billowing up and out. Out of the smoke were figures, people rising up to heaven. Standing above the smoke was Jesus, larger than the buildings, the smoke, and all the people. He had his arms open wide, welcoming everyone into his loving embrace. It's a wonderful picture, but is it accurate? Did everyone who died in that attack—except the terrorists, of course—end up in Jesus' loving arms and in heaven, as the picture seems to say? Does getting killed in a terrorist attack automatically qualify you for heaven?

Listen to Paul's words in our text today: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), he says: stockbroker, pilot, janitor, airline passenger, husband, wife, child, friend. It doesn't matter how you die. It doesn't matter if you are young or old, sick or healthy, whether death came quickly or days later. It doesn't matter if death comes at the hands of a terrorist, a drunk driver, cancer, or old age. All are sinners. All have fallen short of the glory of God.

If we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, then who is welcomed in the arms of Jesus and who isn't? That is the very question that makes the Reformation so important. How can we be right with God so that I can be certain I'll end up in heaven? American optimism or wishful thinking just won't do. We need to know for sure, and that's why the Reformation still matters.

Those eternal questions were answered by Martin Luther and the other reformers by turning to God's own Word in the Bible. Their answers were not made up to make everyone feel good, nor guided by what most people believed, or even by what they wanted the

answers to be deep down in their heart. The Reformation answers were to stand on Scripture alone.

The Book of Romans was pivotal. We've already heard how all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. But that's not the last word. Scripture adds that righteousness comes from God, that we are justified freely by God's grace through Jesus Christ, gifted with a new status, righteousness, free of all guilt before God. Being right with God is his doing. Grace alone saves us. God reaches down with his amazing, undeserved grace and makes our relationship with him right and good. Nothing of our own do we bring; only his undeserved love for us in Jesus, and him alone, gives us the righteousness that we need for eternal life.

That's where the picture about the terrorist attacks has it right. Standing above everything is Jesus. If anyone from that terrorist attack was going to heaven, it was because of Jesus. Perhaps I'm seeing more than what's really there, but in that picture I believe that his outstretched hands have nail marks in them. He hung on a cross to restore a right relationship between God and us. Eternal life comes from his death, and certainty comes from his resurrection. Jesus welcomes people with his loving open arms because the grave could not hold him. Death had no lasting power over him. Only Christ our Savior can guarantee that life after death will bring heaven instead of hell, a loving Father instead of Satan.

Christ alone is the Reformation's answer, the Bible's answer, God's answer to those questions of righteousness and certainty. And faith alone holds onto Jesus, onto God's grace in him. Our faith stands on Scripture alone, grace alone, Christ alone. And this Reformation certainty about God's righteousness in Jesus still matters.

Our experience in this city brings it home - many from our community were impacted by 1 October. Sure, 9/11 was bigger, but this was personal. This was our city, these were our neighbors, coworkers, patients and friends. This was personal, not something awful a couple thousand miles away.

When death—and life—get personal, too close to ignore, too near to rely on American optimism and wishful thinking, that's when the Reformation still matters. And the Reformation's answer to questions of righteousness and certainty in such personal and up-close moments is Jesus.

I keep a log of all the major pastoral occasions that I do - baptisms, weddings, funerals. I looked through that list the other day - many familiar names near and dear, including various members of Mountain View were on that list. Others were a different story, people barely known to me. In many cases I'm asked by a dying person's family member to come and see them. It's often totally out of the blue. Yes, they believed in Jesus, they'd say - they were baptized, confirmed, all very long ago and hadn't been to church in a long time. The kids can't recall seeing their dying loved one reading a Bible or praying with their family, but they said they were Lutheran Christians, and maybe you'd see them on Christmas Eve or Easter, but not usually even then - otherwise "good" seeming people with little evidence of the importance of Jesus to their everyday lives.

I've done this now with dozens of people... I'd go, and stop by the house, the nursing home, the hospital, or hospice. I'd read for the Bible and tell them about Jesus. Then I'd bring out a little book that had an abbreviated Communion service in it. I'd walk us through confession and absolution. I'd place the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus into their hand or into their mouth. We would say the Lord's Prayer together. I'd pronounce the benediction. And God's grace was there, each and every time, with Jesus was there.

Friends, that's why the Reformation still matters - when death gets most personal, when American optimism and wishful thinking run out. Without God's grace, there would be no hope, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But by God's grace alone, Jesus brings righteousness and life not only to those congregation members well known, near and dear but to those dozens of others, receptive, late in the game, to Jesus' amazing, undeserved gifts and promises. It's true for people who have died in a terrorist attack and to

you and me. Yes, the Reformation still matters, for righteousness and certainty come from Jesus and Him alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.